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9 ECOLOGICAL RIGHTS FOUNDATION

10 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
11 NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

12 ECOLOGICAL RIGHTS FOUNDATION, a
13 non-profit corporation,

14 Plaintiff,

15 v.

16 NATIONAL OCEANIC AND
17 ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION,

18 Defendant.

Civil Case No. 19-cv-6661

COMPLAINT FOR DECLARATORY
AND INJUNCTIVE RELIEF

1 Plaintiff Ecological Rights Foundation (“EcoRights”) alleges as follows:

2 INTRODUCTION

3 1. EcoRights brings this action under the Freedom of Information Act (“FOIA”). FOIA,
 4 amongst other things, allows an aggrieved party to seek relief when records are unlawfully withheld and
 5 authorizes a reviewing court to enjoin the agency from withholding records and to order the production
 6 of any agency records improperly withheld from the complainant. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(B). EcoRights
 7 seeks declaratory and injunctive relief for FOIA violations by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric
 8 Administration (“NOAA”). EcoRights submitted a FOIA request to NOAA through the FOIAOnline
 9 system on September 11, 2019 (“FOIA Request”), and this lawsuit addresses NOAA’s failure to comply
 10 with the requirements of FOIA with regards to that FOIA Request.

11 2. FOIA “is plainly written so as to disfavor any effort by agency officials to shirk their
 12 responsibilities to respond promptly and fully to requests for records.” *McGehee v. CIA*, 697 F.2d 1095,
 13 1101 n.18 (D.C. Cir. 1983), *vacated in part on other grounds*, 711 F.2d 1076 (1983) (citation omitted).
 14 Congress has shown “an increasing concern over the timeliness of disclosure, recognizing that delay in
 15 complying with FOIA requests may be tantamount to denial.” *Am. Civil Liberties Union v. Dep’t of*
 16 *Def.*, 339 F. Supp. 2d 501, 504 (S.D.N.Y. 2004) (citations omitted).

17 3. Given the time-sensitive nature of FOIA requests, FOIA litigation is subject to expedited
 18 judicial consideration. Unlike other civil litigation involving a federal agency, a responsive pleading is
 19 required within thirty days of service. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(C) (“Notwithstanding any other provision of
 20 law, the defendant shall serve an answer or otherwise plead to any complaint made under this subsection
 21 within thirty days after service upon the defendant of the pleading in which such complaint is made,
 22 unless the court otherwise directs for good cause shown.”).

23 4. EcoRights’ FOIA Request seeks records related to alleged interference by President
 24 Donald Trump and other White House officials with NOAA’s forecasting of Hurricane Dorian to align it
 25 with President Trump’s debunked predication that the Hurricane would impact Alabama; President
 26 Trump’s map of the predicted course of Hurricane Dorian that appears to have been changed with a
 27 black marker to make it appear that Alabama would be impacted by the Hurricane; attempts by NOAA
 28 staff to control messaging about Hurricane Dorian and the altered map; and information related to

8. This Court has authority to grant declaratory relief pursuant to the Declaratory Judgment Act, 28 U.S.C. § 2201. This Court has authority to grant injunctive relief pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2202 and 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(B).

9. This Court has authority to award costs and attorney fees pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(E).

10. “In the event of noncompliance with the order of the court, the district court may punish for contempt the responsible employee, and in the case of a uniformed service, the responsible member.”

5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(G).

11. The FOIA claims made in this Complaint are ripe for judicial review and the harm NOAA has caused to EcoRights can be remedied by an order of this Court.

12. This Court has personal jurisdiction over NOAA and its officials because NOAA is an agency of the federal government operating within the United States.

VENUE

13. Venue in the United States District Court for the Northern District of California is proper under 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(B) because EcoRights' principal place of business is located within the Northern District of California, specifically in Garberville, California in Humboldt County.

THE PARTIES

14. Plaintiff EcoRights is a non-profit, public benefit corporation, organized under the laws of the State of California, with its principal place of business located in Garberville, California. EcoRights is devoted to furthering the rights of all people to a clean, healthful, and biologically diverse environment. To further its environmental advocacy goals, EcoRights often requests information through FOIA that allows it to serve as a public interest watchdog and to ensure that the federal government is behaving ethically, that it is carrying out its duties responsibly, and that it is complying with the principles of good governance. EcoRights also actively seeks federal and state agency implementation of state and federal environmental laws and, as necessary, directly initiates enforcement actions on behalf of itself and its members. EcoRights brings this action on its own behalf and on behalf of its adversely affected staff and members.

1 15. Any person who files a FOIA request is deemed to have standing to invoke the
2 jurisdiction of the federal courts to carry out the judicial review provisions of FOIA. EcoRights filed the
3 FOIA Request at issue and has standing to bring this FOIA suit.

4 16. EcoRights works in furtherance of its goals in part by acquiring information regarding
5 federal programs and activities through FOIA. EcoRights then compiles and analyzes that information
6 and, subsequently, disseminates that information to its membership, the general public, and public
7 officials through various sources, including reports posted on its website and other websites and through
8 television and radio interviews. EcoRights' successful efforts at educating the public on issues
9 concerning federal government programs and activities contribute significantly to the public's
10 understanding of governmental operations and activities. EcoRights also uses the information that it
11 acquires through FOIA to participate in federal decision-making processes, to file administrative appeals
12 and civil actions, and generally to ensure that federal agencies comply with federal laws.

13 17. EcoRights regularly uses FOIA as an important avenue for gaining information about
14 agency activities. EcoRights is harmed when it is denied timely access to documents to which it is
15 entitled, as it has been here. This harm is ongoing as EcoRights is still unable to use this information to
16 educate the public.

17 18. EcoRights intends to continue its use of FOIA to access agency records in the possession
18 of NOAA. Specifically, EcoRights has concrete plans to submit additional FOIA requests to NOAA as
19 EcoRights' advocacy efforts continue, and to follow up on the information learned while reviewing
20 agency records responsive to the present FOIA Request.

21 19. One of the purposes of FOIA is to promote the active oversight role of public advocacy
22 groups incorporated in many federal laws applicable to federal agencies, including the Administrative
23 Procedure Act. *See, e.g.,* 5 U.S.C. §§ 551, *et seq.* EcoRights uses FOIA to publicize activities of federal
24 agencies and to mobilize the public to participate in advocacy to elected and other government officials.
25 EcoRights intends to continue using FOIA requests to fulfill its oversight and advocacy role through
26 scrutinizing agency records, a practice Congress intended to promote through the adoption of FOIA. The
27 FOIA Request seeks to understand NOAA's actions and policies that appear to have violated the law
28

1 and principles of good governance. This harm can be remedied in part by ensuring EcoRights has
2 prompt access to public records going forward.

3 20. EcoRights, its staff, or one or more of its members have and will suffer direct injury by
4 NOAA's failure to comply with the statutory requirements of FOIA, and a favorable outcome of this
5 litigation will redress that injury. NOAA's refusals to provide timely FOIA access to agency records
6 interferes with EcoRights' ability to participate as an informed watchdog, looking over NOAA's actions
7 to ensure that it adequately follows the law.

8 21. Defendant NOAA is a federal agency of the United States within the U.S. Department of
9 Commerce, and, as such, is an agency subject to the FOIA, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(f). FOIA charges
10 NOAA with the duty to provide public access to agency records in its possession or control. NOAA
11 possesses records responsive to EcoRights' FOIA Request. NOAA is denying EcoRights access to its
12 records in contravention of federal law.

13 22. NOAA failed to lawfully make a determination on EcoRights' FOIA Request within the
14 statutory twenty-working-day limit. As of the date of this filing, NOAA possesses, controls, and
15 unlawfully withholds agency records responsive to EcoRights' FOIA Request that are not subject to a
16 FOIA exemption. As of the date of this filing, NOAA has not completed a FOIA-compliant search for
17 records responsive to EcoRights' FOIA Request.

18 **STATUTORY AND REGULATORY BACKGROUND**

19 23. FOIA was amended in 2007 to reaffirm that Congress, through FOIA, continues to seek
20 to "ensure that the Government remains open and accessible to the American people and is always based
21 not upon the 'need to know' but upon the fundamental 'right to know.'" Pub. L. No. 110-175, 121 Stat.
22 2524, Section 2 ¶ 6 2007).

23 24. Administrative remedies are deemed exhausted whenever an agency fails to comply with
24 the applicable time limits of FOIA, and this puts all questions of FOIA compliance, including but not
25 limited to failure to comply with the twenty-business-day determination deadline, within the jurisdiction
26 of the federal courts. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(C)(i).

27 25. FOIA requires that an agency disclose records to any person except where the record falls
28 under a specifically enumerated exemption. 5 U.S.C. § 552. The courts have emphasized the narrow

1 scope of these exemptions and “the strong policy of the FOIA that the public is entitled to know what its
2 government is doing and why.” *Coastal States Gas Corp. v. Dep’t of Energy*, 617 F.2d 854, 868 (D.C.
3 Cir. 1980).

4 26. When an agency decides to withhold records under a claim of exemption, it must notify
5 the person making the request of that determination and the reasons therefor. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(A)(i).
6 Government agencies bear the burden of proof to show that any withheld records are exempt from the
7 otherwise complete duty to disclose. 5 U.S.C. § 522(a)(4)(B).

8 27. The FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 made significant amendments to FOIA, effective as
9 of enactment on June 30, 2016. *See* Department of Justice Office of Information Policy Summary of the
10 FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, available at [https://www.justice.gov/oip/oip-summary-foia-](https://www.justice.gov/oip/oip-summary-foia-improvement-act-2016)
11 [improvement-act-2016](https://www.justice.gov/oip/oip-summary-foia-improvement-act-2016) (“OIP FOIA 2016 Summary”). The amendments include changes to the standard
12 by which NOAA must evaluate potential withholdings. The FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 dictates
13 that agencies shall withhold information only if disclosure would harm an interest protected by an
14 exemption – what is referred to as the “foreseeable harm standard” – even if that information is arguably
15 subject to an exemption claim by the agency. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(8)(A)(i); OIP FOIA 2016 Summary.
16 This represents an additional thumb on the scale in favor of disclosure.

17 28. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(A)(i) requires that the agency provide enough information,
18 presented with sufficient detail, clarity, and verification, so that the requester can fairly determine what
19 has not been produced and “the reasons therefore.”

20 29. FOIA also requires an agency to consider partial disclosure whenever the agency
21 determines that full disclosure of a requested record is not possible and to take reasonable steps
22 necessary to segregate and release nonexempt information. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(8)(A).

23 30. An agency’s process for processing FOIA requests constitutes “withholding” if its net
24 effect is to significantly impair the requester’s ability to obtain the records or significantly increase the
25 amount of time he or she must wait to obtain them. *McGehee*, 697 F.2d at 1110.

26 31. FOIA requires that an agency, upon any request for records, shall promptly make the
27 records available. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(3)(A). An agency shall make a determination whether to comply
28 with a request within twenty business days after the receipt of the request and shall immediately notify

1 the party making the request of such determination, the reasons for the determination, and the party's
2 right to appeal. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(A)(i).

3 32. Federal agencies are under a duty to conduct a reasonable search for records responsive
4 to a party's request using methods that can be reasonably expected to produce the records requested to
5 the extent those records exist. 5 U.S.C. § 522(a)(3)(C).

6 33. FOIA disputes are normally resolved on summary judgment, with the burden of proving
7 FOIA compliance falling on the agency. The agency must carry its burden of demonstrating all elements
8 of FOIA compliance. The agency may meet its litigation burdens by providing declarations, and
9 disclosing contravening evidence in its possession, that address, among other things: a broad
10 interpretation of the FOIA Request, lawful search, lawful cut-off date for each search for documents
11 responsive to the request, and the justification for withholding any agency record or part thereof in a
12 "*Vaughn* Index."

13 **FACTUAL BACKGROUND**

14 34. On September 11, 2019, EcoRights submitted the FOIA Request to NOAA via
15 FOIAOnline.gov. This FOIA Request, and NOAA's violations of FOIA related to it, is the basis for this
16 lawsuit.

17 35. EcoRights' FOIA Request seeks several specific categories of records relating to
18 NOAA's reporting of Hurricane Dorian and how that may have been compromised by interference from
19 President Trump and/or others in the White House. The documents EcoRights requests constitute the
20 best available evidence of this potentially unethical and illegal activity.

21 36. On information and belief, NOAA has never attempted to or made contact with
22 EcoRights related to the FOIA Request.

23 37. EcoRights contacted NOAA on October 10, 2019 to inquire into the status of the FOIA
24 Request. EcoRights made it clear that NOAA's determination was now overdue and that EcoRights
25 would bring a lawsuit to remedy this violation of FOIA if NOAA did not produce all records within one
26 week. NOAA completely failed to respond to this email, necessitating this lawsuit.

27 38. As of the filing date of this Complaint, EcoRights has not received NOAA's final
28 determination on the FOIA Request.

39. As of the filing date of this Complaint, NOAA currently possesses or controls, and is withholding, agency records responsive to EcoRights' FOIA Request that are not subject to a FOIA exemption. NOAA's withholding of agency records is unlawful.

40. As of the filing date of this Complaint, NOAA continues to withhold agency records responsive to the FOIA Request. NOAA has not made and communicated a final determination on the FOIA Request. NOAA has not completed a FOIA-compliant search. NOAA has not provided the "cut-off date" used for any search, thereby frustrating EcoRights' intent to file a follow-up FOIA request. NOAA has provided no sufficient basis for withholding any of the specific agency records being withheld in full or in part.

41. EcoRights now turns to this Court to provide relief that ensures EcoRights, its membership, and the public have the prompt public access to agency records guaranteed by FOIA. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6).

FIRST CLAIM FOR RELIEF

Violation of FOIA: Constructive Denial and Unlawfully Withholding

Agency Records Responsive to the FOIA Request

42. EcoRights repeats and incorporates by reference the allegations in the above paragraphs and all paragraphs of this Complaint.

43. NOAA has not communicated to EcoRights the scope of the documents it intends to produce and withhold in response to the FOIA Request or its reasons for withholding any documents, and has not disclosed to EcoRights records responsive to the FOIA Request.

44. NOAA violated FOIA (5 U.S.C. § 552(a)) by failing to provide a lawful determination and response to EcoRights' September 11, 2019, FOIA Request within the statutory twenty-day period. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(A)(i).

45. This failure to make a lawful determination on EcoRights' FOIA Request within the time frame required by FOIA is a constructive denial and wrongful withholding of the records EcoRights requested in violation of FOIA. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(A)(i); 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(C)(i).

46. NOAA continues to violate FOIA by not making responsive records promptly available to EcoRights. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a).

SECOND CLAIM FOR RELIEF

Violation of FOIA: Unlawfully Withholding Agency Records

Responsive to the FOIA Request that are Not Subject to a FOIA Exemption

47. EcoRights repeats and incorporates by reference the allegations in the above paragraphs and all paragraphs of this Complaint.

48. EcoRights has a statutory right to the records it seeks, and there is no legal basis for NOAA to assert that any of FOIA's nine disclosure exemptions apply. *See* 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(1)-(9).

49. NOAA continues to violate FOIA by illegally withholding agency records that are responsive to the FOIA Request, but which NOAA has not demonstrated are subject to any FOIA withholding provision and which, on information and belief, are not subject to any such provision. 5 U.S.C. § 552(b).

THIRD CLAIM FOR RELIEF

Violation of FOIA – Failure to Conduct an Adequate Search

50. EcoRights repeats and incorporates by reference the allegations in the above paragraphs and all paragraphs of this Complaint.

51. EcoRights has a statutory right to have NOAA process its FOIA Request in a manner that complies with FOIA. EcoRights' statutory rights in this regard were violated when NOAA unlawfully failed to undertake a search reasonably calculated to locate records responsive to EcoRights' FOIA Request.

52. NOAA continues to violate FOIA by failing to conduct and document a lawful search for responsive records, which is a condition precedent to a lawful determination. On information and belief, NOAA has withheld responsive agency records due to an unlawfully narrow search. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(3)(B)-(C).

REQUEST FOR RELIEF

WHEREFORE, EcoRights respectfully requests that this Court enter judgment providing the following relief:

A. Enter findings and declare that NOAA violated its duty to comply with FOIA's statutory deadlines;

- 1 B. Enter findings and declare that NOAA violated FOIA by unlawfully withholding agency
- 2 records responsive to EcoRights' FOIA Request;
- 3 C. Enter findings and declare that NOAA violated FOIA by failing to conduct a search
- 4 reasonably calculated to locate the records responsive to EcoRights' FOIA Request;
- 5 D. Direct by injunction that NOAA provide EcoRights a lawful determination on EcoRights'
- 6 FOIA Request by a date certain;
- 7 E. Direct by order that NOAA conducts a lawful search for responsive records;
- 8 F. Direct by order that NOAA provides proof that it conducted a lawful search with a cutoff
- 9 date set as the date of such order;
- 10 G. Direct by injunction that NOAA promptly provide all agency records responsive to
- 11 EcoRights' FOIA Request that are not subject to withholding pursuant to one of the nine recognized
- 12 FOIA exemptions;
- 13 H. Direct by order that NOAA provide EcoRights with a detailed statement justifying each
- 14 withholding of an agency record, or portions thereof, in accordance with the indexing requirements of
- 15 *Vaughn v. Rosen*, 484 F.2d 820 (D.C. Cir. 1973), *cert. denied*, 415 U.S. 977 (1974);
- 16 I. Direct by order that NOAA provide EcoRights with all responsive agency records by a
- 17 date certain, within twenty working days of any such order;
- 18 J. Grant EcoRights' costs of litigation, including reasonable attorney fees as provided by
- 19 FOIA, 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(E); and,
- 20 K. Provide such other relief as the Court deems just and proper.
- 21

22 **DISCLOSURE OF NON-PARTY INTERESTED ENTITIES OR PERSONS**

23 Based on Plaintiff's knowledge to date, pursuant to Civil Local Rule 3-15, the undersigned
24 certifies that, as of this date, other than the named parties, there is no such interest to report.

25 Dated: October 17, 2019

Respectfully submitted,

26 By:

Christopher a. Sproul

27 Christopher Sproul
28 Counsel for Ecological Rights Foundation